

New Orleans golf courses are slow to recover

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By Dave Lagarde

PGATOUR.com Correspondent

Editor's note: PGATOUR.com correspondent Dave Lagarde was among the millions forced to evacuate New Orleans when Hurricane Katrina unleashed its fury on the Gulf Coast. He initially fled to Dallas with his parents, both in their 90s, to stay with friends. He continued to live like a nomad for several months before returning to his birthplace to rebuild.

Lagarde has written about how Katrina affected the region he loves so much. Learn how three PGA TOUR players from Louisiana made a difference. Learn the lengths to which club pros and superintendents are going to rebuild courses. And learn about the preparations leading up to the PGA TOUR's return to the Crescent City for the [Zurich Classic of New Orleans](#)

In many ways, New Orleans was in the midst of a renaissance in August, 2005, one much more pastoral than cultural with golf as the flourishing centerpiece. The game of a lifetime experienced a growth spurt unlike any other in the Crescent City's history.

- New Orleans Country Club completed an extensive re-design by architect Bobby Weed.
- Metairie Country Club was restored to the way it looked when Seth Raynor first moved its suburban soil just after 1910.
- The new Pete Dye-designed Players Club of Louisiana had just hosted its first Zurich Classic of New Orleans and expected to stage many more.
- The Links at Stonebridge, a 27-hole complex, just completed a \$12 million renovation.
- Audubon Park Golf Club went from a rundown goat ranch to a pristine executive gem in the heart of the city's thriving Uptown area.
- Plans were on the drawing board to create a Bobby Weed-designed championship layout, using the East Course at picturesque Bayou Oaks in sprawling City Park, just an eight-minute drive from downtown.
- Lakewood Country Club, scene of more than 25 PGA TOUR events, contracted with Ron Garl to bring its course into the 21st century.
- City-owned Joe Bartholomew Memorial Golf Course was undergoing renovations to turn the rundown facility into a First Tee operation.

And on and on it went.

Oak Harbor in Slidell had new greens. Timberlane Country Club was kicking around the idea of an overhaul of its Robert Trent Jones design. Colonial Country Club spent \$5 million to rework its track.

Consequently tourists were packing more than suitcases when heading to New Orleans. Finally golf clubs were coming along for the ride as the game was slowly but surely becoming a much larger part of the Big Easy's recreational fabric.

Then Hurricane Katrina, with its horrific winds and deadly flood waters, wreaked havoc on New Orleans and the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Golf was blindsided as the boom quickly went bust.

New Orleans CC and Metairie CC were under anywhere from 6-12 feet of water for three weeks. The three courses at City Park, where more than 200,000 rounds were played annually, were inundated by 10-12 feet. The Golf Club of New Orleans at Eastover, a 36-hole complex that catered to tourists, was submerged. Portions of the TPC of Louisiana also flooded. Oak Harbor took the brunt of a storm surge that easily topped 20 – and perhaps 30 – feet.



TPC Louisiana looks to re-open sometime in the fall.

Hundreds of thousands of fallen trees littered the golf landscape. Greens were force-fed a lethal saltwater diet for far too long.

So here it is, pushing eight months in the post-Katrina era in the metropolitan area and many courses are struggling to rise from the near dead. But the fight goes on and will not stop for the majority.

The 36 holes at Eastover remain closed and speculation is they may never re-open although owner Donnie Pate has stated publicly that the property will come back, but only with its original 18 holes.

City Park's three courses, the bell cows of the Park's revenue stream, look like pasture land more suited to grazing cattle than golfers. The driving range opened recently, but it will take a major infusion of capital to get the golf courses up and running. All the equipment used to tend to the courses is gone. There is no staffing.

"I don't know if it will ever recover," said Gordon Digby of Kemper Sports, the outfit that managed the Park's golf operations said shortly after the storm as the Park took an estimated \$25 million hit.

The loss of Bayou Oaks and semi-private Eastover had the most significant impact on the city. Bayou Oaks was the largest public facility in the area and Eastover was the most popular venue for charity golf tournaments that raised millions of dollars for not-so-profit organizations. Ninety holes were lost from the golf inventory.

"The loss, when you factor in economic impact, is in the hundreds of millions of dollars," said Robert Brown, the executive director of the Gulf States Section of the PGA of America. "And those are dollars that cannot be recouped. For every day a facility was closed, the golf pro cannot make up those rounds. We likely won't know the full effect for years. But my sense is some courses won't survive down the road."

Courses that have not re-opened and likely will not in the foreseeable future include Aviation Oaks in Belle Chasse, Hidden Oaks Golf Club in Braithwaite and Port Sulphur Golf Course in Port Sulphur. The Bartholomew project remains in limbo and it's anyone's guess as to the fate of Bayou Oaks.

But never underestimate the will and determination of the area's golf professionals and golfers who use the game as an important outlet during what promises to be a long, slow and arduous recovery period. Take, for example, what James Leitz, the director of golf at Pinewood Country Club in Slidell, an area that bore the brunt of Katrina's horrific storm surge, did to get his course re-opened.

Leitz, along with his sons Ross and Stephen as well as a school teacher friend, began restoration as soon as it was possible. When Ross headed back to LSU and the school teacher returned to his classroom, only two workers remained. They worked from dawn to dusk for 55 consecutive days, finally re-opening Pinewood in November.

"We were knocked down, but not knocked out," James Leitz said. "I decided to get back into the ring and fight. I was determined to hand this club back to the members. I knew when they came back they needed something to keep them sane."

Leitz is by no means the Lone Ranger. So many other professionals did the same thing, fighting back for the love of the game and the relief it provides weary minds.

The Tournament Players Club has a scheduled re-opening sometime in the fall. Its closure caused the Fore!Kids Foundation, the not-for-profit that oversees the daily operation of the Zurich Classic of New Orleans, to scramble for a venue in 2006. Fortunately English Turn suffered minimal damage and gladly accepted the event it lost to the TPC in 2005.

The 27-hole complex The Links at Stonebridge, which sustained minimal damage, has been sold for 75 cents on the dollar. But the property is doing great business, especially on the weekends.

New Orleans Country Club has re-opened. Ditto Metairie, Oak Harbor and Audubon, although the latter is available for play only five days a week. All the courses in the Covington-Mandeville area suffered wind damage and lost trees but they're back as well.

Katrina had little effect on golf courses west of the city and they have never had more play. But is still cause for alarm. While tourism picked up after the first of the year, it isn't close to what it should be and may never reach its pre-Katrina level. For all the strides forward, it's impossible to ignore the fact that it's still a long, slow recovery process. And it still really hurts.